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## STUDENT REPORT

THE PRISONERS OF WAR EXPERIENCES AND SURVIVAL

MAJOR WILLIAM A. TOLBERT, USAF

87-2540

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**AUTHOR(S)** MAJOR WILLIAM A. TOLBERT, USAF  
**FACULTY ADVISOR** MAJOR MARK WARNER, ACSC/EDC  
**SPONSOR** LT COL DAVID L. McFARLAND, ACSC/EDH

Submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of  
requirements for graduation.

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<p>The experience of Vietnam era prisoners of war provides valuable lessons for future POWs. These lessons offer ways and means to resist exploitation and torture. Examples are numerous, and suggest ways to resist and cope with torture, near starvation, and exploitation. Religious beliefs, moral values, and faith in one's fellow prisoners and country are key elements that influence POW survival. Strong bodies and active, creative minds enabled POWs to overcome primitive living conditions and barbaric treatment.</p> <p>The Code of Conduct provided POWs a valuable guide for their behavior; as POWs they knew what behavior was expected. A strong POW chain of command influenced compliance and understanding of articles of the Code of Conduct and tailored requirements to fit the situation. A strong chain of command can reduce enemy violations of international laws. Communications are pivotal to POW accountability. The ability of future POWs to survive captivity can be enhanced with knowledge and understanding of ordeals encountered by American POWs in Vietnam.</p>					
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## PREFACE

The purpose of this research project is to examine the key factors that enabled American prisoners of war (POWs) to survive captivity in North Vietnam. Prison conditions, torture, camp rules, the Code of Conduct, Fourth Allied POW Wing policies, American values, religion, and propaganda will be the major focus of this study. Additionally, lessons learned will be developed for use by future POWs.

The capture and imprisonment of American prisoners of war had a profound effect upon family members, the nation and prisoners. Family members were unaware of the status of loved ones; there was uncertainty whether they were dead or alive. The nation, divided in its opposition to the war, united in its desire to secure the release of POWs. The outpouring of sympathy and love for POWs mobilized public support for their safe return. POWs suffered torture, mental abuse, and near starvation, yet they steadfastly kept faith with their country and its ideals. Their story is a remarkable testament to the human spirit and the desire to survive under adverse conditions. It also demonstrates that men with a sense of purpose and values can endure and become stronger in their faith. Future and potential POWs can learn a great deal from the experiences of the Vietnam POWs.

In the text of this research project there are several statements that cannot be attributed to a specific person. These statements are conclusions and general observations from interviews and conversations I (the author) had with General Flynn, General Risner, Colonel Day, and Colonel Ellis. Some statements are ideas and perceptions mutually shared by all, and occurred through my interaction with these former POWs.

Lastly, and most importantly, I offer my sincere thanks to Lieutenant General (Ret.) John P. Flynn, Brigadier General (Ret.) Robinson Risner, Colonel (Ret.) Bud Day, and Colonel Leon Ellis, Jr, for the valuable time they gave to allow me to learn from their experiences. Also, I thank them for showing us the way to survive with dignity and honor.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Major William A. Tolbert was commissioned through Officers Training School (OTS) in 1973. He is a 1973 graduate of the University of Nebraska with a degree in social psychology. After graduating from OTS, he attended the Social Actions course for Equal Opportunity and Treatment Officers at Lackland AFB, Texas. After completion of school, he was assigned to Laughlin AFB, Texas as the Equal Opportunity and Treatment Officer for the 47th Flying Training Wing. In October 1974, he was reassigned to Headquarters Air Force Military Training Center (AFMTC) at Lackland AFB, Texas as the Center EOT officer. In 1977, he cross-trained into the Security Police career field, attended the Security Police Academy Officer's course, and was assigned to the 3700th Security Police Squadron at Lackland AFB, Texas. He was assigned to Araxas AB, Greece in 1979 serving as the Chief of Security Police. In 1980, Major Tolbert was assigned to the 7th Security Police Squadron, Carswell AFB, Texas where he served as the Operations Officer. He is a 1981 graduate of Squadron Officer School. In 1984 he was assigned to the 36th Security Police Squadron, Bitburg AB, Germany as Commander. Major Tolbert holds a master's degree from Texas Christian University.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**REPORT NUMBER** 87-2540

**AUTHOR(S)** MAJOR WILLIAM A. TOLBERT USAF

**TITLE** THE PRISONERS OF WAR EXPERIENCES AND SURVIVAL

I. Purpose: The purpose of this research paper is to examine the key factors that enabled American prisoners of war (POWs) in North Vietnam to survive captivity and confinement. Once the major factors have been identified and analyzed, lessons learned will be established for the benefit of future POWs.

II. Problem: Although Americans have been held as prisoners in WWI, WWII, and Korea, the American POW experience in Vietnam was vastly different. Assessing the POW experience of Vietnam veterans provides recent data current to today's dynamic issues. Concise factors will be developed from the POW experience for universal application. These core lessons should be applicable to POWs in any environment.

III. Data: The examples provided by American POWs in Vietnam offer tangible lessons learned to draw upon. The POWs of the Vietnam era endured starvation, torture, and brutality, but found the inner strength to overcome these obstacles to return home with honor. Prison conditions, torture, propaganda, camp rules, the Code of Conduct, Fourth Allied POW Wing policies (PLUMS), American values, and religion all had major effects on POW survival. Through books written by former POWs and personal interviews, these major areas will be examined from the perspective of the POWs to ascertain their influence on future POWs. Future and potential POWs may be better able to cope with

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imprisonment by realistic historical examples provided by veterans of the brutal captivity that existed in North Vietnam prisons.

IV. Conclusions: The first American POWs of the Vietnam war were captured in 1964; by 1973, when release came, there were over 450 American prisoners. The treatment was barbaric at best; torture was a constant threat. Vietnamese POW camps were second only to the POW camps of the Korean war and Japan in human suffering and degradation. Despite torture or prolonged solitary confinement, American POWs performed well and followed the Code of Conduct to the very best of their ability. The POWs were largely ordinary men who possessed no super-human strength or training. Many had never seriously thought of the possibility of becoming a POW--that happens to the other guy. But once they became prisoners they developed the strength and courage to survive. There were a number of factors which enabled them to survive prolonged captivity and torture. They possessed faith in God and their country. They believed in what they were doing and their actions were guided by the Code of Conduct. They possessed extraordinary courage. Additionally, as prisoners, they developed strong leadership, organized resistance and communications. This enabled them to develop a sense of purpose and group solidarity. Their ability to overcome extreme living conditions and brutality is a lesson of the strength of the human spirit. It is as much a story of America and free men fighting oppression as it is a struggle of survival. The influence of American values and a history of freedom and opportunity is linked to the struggle of the POWs to survive and ultimately be released with honor. Their story makes you proud to be an American and is an affirmation of all that is good in this country.

V. Recommendations: US service personnel should become familiar with the experience of American POWs. Project Warrior and other viable sources of information for service personnel, must make a greater effort to publicize this particular area. Forums should be conducted throughout the services to facilitate an awareness of the very real possibility of capture and imprisonment of personnel during future wars and conflicts. Future enemies should be studied in the wake of current events and international alliances to give potential POWs an idea of what they can expect if captured. Key lessons developed here should be discussed for applicability in today's military environment.

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

The United States offers its citizens an opportunity to serve in the military as soldiers for a nation of lofty principles. "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Having been born in a country where such fundamental values are observed and perpetuated, generations of American youth have accepted the challenge to preserve those principles on which this nation was founded in peacetime and war.

As a member of the armed services with the constant shift in international politics, changing military involvements worldwide and terrorist adventurism, service members may be placed in situations where the possibility of being a victim of terrorism or a prisoner of war. Should the unthinkable occur, there are examples to draw from that will offer strength of moral purpose and a way to survive under adverse conditions.

The examples of our prisoners of war (POWs) in Vietnam offer many valuable lessons. The POWs of the Vietnam era endured starvation, torture, and extreme inhumane treatment. Yet, these men found the inner strength, courage, and dignity to overcome these obstacles to return home with a sense of purpose. The purpose of this study is to examine the key elements and develop lessons learned to aid future POWs. This will be accomplished by analyzing prison conditions, torture, propaganda, camp rules, the Code of Conduct, Fourth Allied POW Wing policies (PLUMs), American values, and religion. Each of these factors ultimately facilitated the survival of American POWs. To fully explore these factors I will use quotations obtained from POWs from published books and personal interviews conducted by this author. Finally, from these sources I wish to establish lessons learned. The experiences of our POWs in Vietnam offer future generations of servicemen clear guidelines of behavior to survive as a POW. The typical experience of these men meant torture, near starvation, interrogation, mental abuse, and adverse living conditions. Imprisonment for Americans constituted living on filthy floors infested with rats, cockroaches, and spiders, conditions barely fit for human survival.

## Chapter Two

### PRISON CONDITIONS

Colonel Robinson Risner (Brigadier General, Retired) in his book, The Passing of the Night, provided a vivid description of the initial shock and depression suffered by a POW. This description was after having spent several months in solitary confinement and being totally without human contact for the first time in his life.

The distinctive character of imprisonment in a North Vietnamese prison camp was a suffocating monstrosity--the pervasive sameness of the routine, over and over, day in and day out.

Bodies built for movement were confined to closet-like boxes. Active minds were forced to be idle within the numbing nothingness of four walls in a dingy little cell.

Men trained to fly sophisticated machines at incredible speeds and breathtaking heights were caged like animals. No more horizons to scan, no more clouds to soar above, no more barriers to break through.

But worse than that, no people to be close to. No wife to kiss, no child to hold, no friend to embrace nor hand to shake (13:v).

The day-to-day existence in primitive circumstances of the prison complexes devastated the POWs. These prison complexes were given various names by the POWs who lived in them. According to Captain Larry Chesley, the name "Hanoi Hilton" was the American nickname for the major prison compound in Hanoi.

The Vietnamese are more realistic; their name for it is Hoa Lo, which means "hell hole." Built by the French, it is a huge compound roughly rectangular in shape, the long wall measuring perhaps 200 yards. It is divided into several sections, each of which POWs referred to as a camp. One camp was known as Little Vegas, its rooms dubbed by Las Vegas casino names--Desert Inn, Stardust, Golden Nugget, The Mint, and Thunderbird. Another camp was called Camp Unity. Two other camps, Heartbreak Hotel and New Guy Village were the primary areas used for the initial interrogations (1:16).

When the door slammed and the key turned in that rusty iron lock, a feeling of utter loneliness swept over me. I lay down on that cold cement slab in my 6x6 prison. The smell of human excrement burned my nostrils. A rat, large as a small cat, scampered across the

slab beside me. The walls and floors and ceilings were caked with filth. Bars covered a tiny window high above the door (14:28).

This was New Guy Village as described by Navy Captain Howie Rutledge in his book, In the Presence of Mine Enemies. He further described both the cells and the primitive conditions found in the camps.

Inside this tomb-like building were eight individual cells, 6x6 feet. Each held two concrete bunks, one on each side, with barely enough room to walk between them. The bunks were about two feet wide and at the bottom of each, imbedded in cement, was a set of iron stocks. A prisoner would put his feet in place, and another iron bar was forced down across the top with an iron pin to lock them. There were seven cells with an eighth prepared as a kind of washing place. This was Heartbreak Hotel (14:22).

The last two camps, named Briarpatch and The Zoo, housed sizable numbers of Americans at the peak of the Vietnam war. General Risner described these two facilities.

About 35 miles west of Hanoi, near the mountains, another facility was in use which had been dubbed the Briarpatch. It was primitive, with no lights or running water. . . .

A new facility, The Zoo, was being opened up. It was near the center of Hanoi, about five miles from the Hanoi Hilton. It appeared to have been an old French rest area--a kind of motel. There was an empty theater with an inclined floor and stage. The buildings were constructed in a circle with a 15- to 20-foot wall around the outside with broken glass on top. In the very center of the camp was a pool the Vietnamese used both for swimming and for growing fish. And, though structurally sound, it had literally not been cleaned in years (13:63).

While the physical plant utilized to house the POWs was at best dehumanizing and totally unfit to live in, the basic staple of life, food, was barely fit for human consumption. POWs, however, realized the meager diet at least provided some basic nourishment. Navy Captain Howie Rutledge stated,

Our food was basically the same those first five years. We ate two meals a day. It was either rice or hard French bread with a liter of boiled water. Also, we had a bowl of soup, the rotten cabbage or seaweed varieties, and in the summer sewer greens--little green shoots that grew around sewers. These were thrown on top of the soup with a piece or two of sowbelly--all fat--plus skin and hair. We didn't eat high off the hog; you can believe that! Now and then we would get a fish head or tail, all scrap, maybe a hamster, and, if lucky, dog meat or fragged duck (fragged duck because the duck had been cleavered--bones and all--into tiny fragments). Most of what we ate I considered inedible before prison,

but meat--even dog meat--is the prime source of protein, and to survive we ate it, hair and all. (14:72)

Colonel Leon Ellis described his reaction to the Vietnamese diet for POWs by stating,

The camp authorities made sure that our drinking water was boiled. Drinking hot water in the summer time was definitely not my cup of tea, but I never complained because I knew it was safe. We were also fortunate that our food was always cooked. The normal fare consisted of six months of pumpkin soup, four months of cabbage soup, and about two months of turnip green soup. Sometimes there was a side dish consisting of sauteed pumpkin and pig fat, or if we were lucky, a serving of bean curd or fish powder. The meal was usually accompanied by rice or bread.

The cooking seemed to kill all the germs that were associated with the various critters and extraneous objects found in the food. The critters seemed to come and go in seasons as did the diet. In the spring tiny white worms, too numerous to pick out, might be floating in our soup. One August I counted 44 weevils in one cubic inch of bread (6:19).

General (Ret) Robinson Risner told of the daily food deliveries, constant hunger, and attempts to obtain additional food.

The big part of the day was the twice-a-day food report, at 9:30 and 3:30. First, a guard would bring in the food and set it on a little stool by the wall. Then he would go after the water. While he was gone, it was a real big deal to report to everyone what the food was. The color of the soup. What kind of vegetable, if any. How big were the loaves of bread (13:100).

He further stated,

After we ate, a guard would take me down to wash the dishes. He watched constantly while I was washing the dishes to make sure I didn't get any extra food. If I caught him not looking, I would eat every scrap available, including that which had been partially eaten. If they caught me. I would have to pour everything out on the floor, which was filthy. It was virtually the habitat of the rats. This was the room where for 40 years guards had relieved themselves in a pit and where we emptied our waste buckets.

But despite the filth, as soon as the guards turned away or left, I'd pick up the scraps and devour them. There were times when I found banana peels that had turned black. They would be thrown in a corner, where I knew the rats had nosed over them. I was so continuously starved that anything with substance or bulk was a blessing (13:101).

Such were the conditions: filthy and plagued by roaches, spiders, and other insects. POWs competed with rats often described as approaching the size of dogs for food. All suffered from constant hunger. While hunger became the POWs' constant companion, torture, the threat of death, and attempts by their captors to exploit them for propaganda purposes became their worst nightmare.

## Chapter Three

### TORTURE AND PROPAGANDA

The North Vietnamese used torture for a multitude of reasons. In some instances the POWs were tortured for political reasons to both embarrass the United States and influence international and domestic opposition to the war. The Vietnamese forced POWs to make propaganda tapes denouncing the American government, make anti-war statements, or sign confessions as war criminals. Paradoxically, as the war went on, POWs were tortured to make statements denying that torture existed. They were forced to declare that their jailers provided humane and civil treatment.

The methods of torture used by the Vietnamese were highly effective in terms of creating pain and injuring the victims. The goal of forcing the prisoners to make propaganda statements was life threatening to the prisoners attempting to resist. Most POWs resisted cooperating until they realized that they might be killed (2:--). Several examples of the torture techniques used on the POWs were provided by the interviews.

General Risner described a devastating torture session; one filled with both intense pain and mental anguish.

He gave a signal to the two guards standing behind me. One of them grabbed my arms and handcuffed them while the other yanked my hair and pulled my head back. He said, "Open your mouth!" When I would not do it, he pressed his fingers into my jaws forcing my mouth open. Now they began cramming it full of newspapers. They tied a blindfold over my eyes, and with my wrists handcuffed behind me and my mouth full of newspapers, I was hustled out the door into a truck. After what seemed like an eternity, they took off my handcuffs and blindfold and stood there grinning as I feverishly yanked the newspapers out of my mouth and throat. My jaw felt like it was broken, but to be able to breathe was a great feeling (13:79).

He continued,

One of the guards motioned me to the bunk, I got up on the bunk, to lay down and put my legs in the slots. He slapped down the locks, tested them, and with a laugh they both left. Part of the discomfort was due to the design of the stocks. Instead of my legs resting on the bunk, the legs were elevated a couple of inches above the bunk, all the weight and pressure was on the lower pelvis bones

which, in my case, had nothing covering them except skin. In less than an hour I felt exhausted. On the fourth day I was given ten minutes out of the stocks for toilet privileges. I could hardly move. It seemed like a second when the guard motioned me back in the stocks (13:87-88).

From 31 October 1965 until 2 December 1965, Col Risner was left in this position, existing on bread and water, sleeping on a slab of cement with only a thin mat as a cushion in the coldest part of the Vietnam winter. During this period of time, he lost control of his bowels several times and was allowed to lie in his own waste for several days. Finally, after 32 days in the stocks, he was released. Risner was weak, suffering from diarrhea and void of all strength. Any thought of better treatment was merely a fantasy (13:78-89).

But this was only a primer. The cell door opened and several guards rushed in. While I was still in the stocks they forced me over cutting my legs. They had some rough rope and started tying my arms behind me. One produced a couple of pads about an inch thick and as big as silver dollars made of something like horsehair. The guards put them over my eyes, and by wrapping bandages around my head, forced the pads back into my eye sockets. They took my legs out of the stocks and led me out into the courtyard. Now they got more rope and started working my arms together behind my back. After they wrapped each one as tight as they could they started tying them together, working upward. The pain began to be excruciating as they pulled them tighter and tighter. My right shoulder began to slip out of its socket. I saw the bright lights and my ears rang. Now they started on my legs. They pulled my ankles up behind me, wrapped the rope around my throat, and brought it back to my ankles and tied it. My feet were pulled up behind me. I was blindfolded, bound hand and foot, and my chest was sticking out like a proud pigeon. If I relaxed my arched back, I would choke. I had never felt pain like that in my life. I tried to stretch my legs and choke myself into unconsciousness. I had to get rid of the pain. I began praying for oblivion: "Lord, let me faint." I almost succeeded, and then I would come to. When the pain started really ripping me, I began desperately to pray. I don't know how long I endured it--several hours. I was hollering now. I knew I couldn't last much longer. My guts and determination were shattered. When I saw I wasn't going to be able to hold out any longer, I prayed, "God, you've got to help me. I can't afford to give in. I'd be a traitor" (13:94-96).

Finally, after enduring as much pain as he could, General Risner was forced to write a letter of apology to the Vietnamese people for violating their sovereign air space and committing grave and heinous crimes against the Vietnamese people. Because of the torture, his penmanship looked like a beginner's. It was hardly readable but his torturers were happy (13:96).

While the torture described by General Risner was effective, Colonel John D. Dramesi in his book, Code of Honor, described other forms used against the POWs.

I was dressed only in my black shorts and short-sleeved shirt. By pulling on my handcuffed wrists, I was stretched out face down on a small table. The flailing began with what we called the "fan belt." It was a strip of rubber cut from an old tire. The guards and prisoners used it as a rope to draw water out of the compound's filthy wells. Once, when a piece broke off, a guard had discovered it made a very effective whip. I began to whimper, then cry, then with each stroke scream. As the lashing continued, my screaming turned again into crying and, as the guards exhausted themselves, the crying to whimpering (4:120).

A second method described by Colonel Dramesi was a part of the same torture session described previously.

Each would start out slapping me with his right, then his left hand. When they realized they could not hit me hard enough with their left hands, they concentrated on getting full power out of their right-hand roundhouse swings. As they concentrated more and became more tired, the hand slowly became a fist. It was not long before the left side of my face was swollen and bleeding. My left eye was closed. A cloth was available to wipe the blood from their right hands (4:122).

There were times when these severe beatings took a much heavier toll. One such instance of extreme torture came after a prison escape and recapture. Colonel Dramesi, who was being tortured for this attempt, was in the cell next to a fellow escapee, Captain Ed Atterberry, and described the incident.

I knew Ed was in the Hanoi Hilton in a room close to room 18. No doubt the whole camp heard his cries. On the night of the eighteenth of May, I could hear them beating Ed. Suddenly the hush of death seemed to fall over the whole prison (4:126).

Captain Ed Atterberry was never seen or heard from again. In 1973, when the POWs were released by the North Vietnamese, Atterberry was reported to have died in prison of natural causes.

As we have seen, the level and various forms of torture had a crippling and at times lethal impact on the POWs. Next, we will examine the propaganda and intelligence derived from these torture sessions.

The North Vietnamese's main propaganda goal was to embarrass the United States and thus make political gains in the struggle for support and international public opinion. In the Korean war, American POWs were tortured to sign false germ-warfare confessions (15:147). The officers of the USS Pueblo

were tortured to sign false confessions of spying in Korean waters (10:212). Vietnam POWs were tortured for anti-war statements, war crime confessions, and other statements embarrassing to the US Government. Although torture of the POWs provided the desired statements, most of what the Vietnamese got was of little or no value (2:--).

The story of several POWs' experiences in this area clearly captures the reality and inhumaneness of the situation. Brigadier General Robinson Risner (then colonel) was taken before an East German film crew to make a propaganda film. He was forced to answer several questions provided by the Vietnamese. They also provided the expected replies.

The cat (interrogation officer) stated, "These are the questions they will ask you. Here are the answers you will give them." He read them off one by one. One of them was to be, "How do you think the war should be settled?" My answer was to be, "The United States should withdraw all troops from South Vietnam, dismantle all bases, and cease all aid to the puppet government of Thieu" (13:163).

When Colonel Risner appeared before the film crew, his act was not totally convincing. He tried to show obvious signs of the torture he had received and to vary his answers to show that his appearance was not voluntary. A member of the film crew remarked, "Wipe the sweat off, you've looked terrified the whole time." Risner had done his job (13:164).

Months later, Colonel Risner was forced to appear before a North Korean crew.

One of the first questions was, "How many crimes have you committed against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea?" They knew my background and that I was a Korean ace. I answered, "I have never committed a crime against your country." They asked, "How many Korean villages have you bombed?" I replied, "I have never bombed your country. The only thing I have done in your country is shoot down eight of your aircraft in air-to-air combat." They kept asking the same questions, and I kept answering the same. I was trying hard not to offend them. Cat appeared quite angry. He said, "You will write a letter of apology to our comrades in the struggle against the American imperialists!" Then he dictated a letter that said something like, "I apologize for my insolent attitude to the distinguished representative of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. I apologize for lying because I have committed many grave crimes against your people and country for which I am sincerely sorry." I signed it (13:173).

Another instance of propaganda involved Navy Commander Jeremiah Denton (former Senator from Alabama). Commander Denton was brutally tortured after he agreed to meet with several foreign correspondents equipped with movie cameras. Although he was under the threat of more torture, he carefully worded his answers to present a pro-US position. Still he knew there was a

risk that his words would be edited and his true situation would not be projected. Commander Denton was one who always looked for a way to fight back, and as he blinked in front of the bright lights, he struck on a brilliant idea--a perfect way to send a signal. He began to blink in Morse Code: T - O - R - T - U - R - E. Fortunately, this film clip made its way back to the United States where Naval intelligence broke the code. This was the first concrete evidence received by Americans that the POWs were being tortured (3:91-94). Later, when a press report leaked indicating the nature of the message passed by Commander Denton, he was severely tortured.

Americans captured in the hinterlands of North Vietnam were often used for internal propaganda. These newly captured aircrews were displayed to the local villages and peasants to show the great victories of the Communist Party and to generate hatred against the US. A primary example of this use was the Hanoi march on July 6, 1966. On this day the Vietnamese gathered 56 POWs from various camps, handcuffed them together two by two, and marched them down the main street of Hanoi. To enhance and record the spectacle, big trucks carrying floodlights and cameras kept pace with the marchers. The road was lined with people. At first they just stood and watched, but as the march got under way a man started yelling into the microphone, stirring up the onlookers. They began shouting, "Bow your heads! Bow your heads!" The Americans would not bow their heads--they held them high and looked straight ahead. Aroused by the man on the microphone, the crowd became a mob as they pushed among the prisoners, grabbing their neck, punching, kicking, and hitting the POWs with bottles and rocks. One POW would be holding up his buddy, who had just been hit in the stomach or kicked in the groin and was unable to walk, and the next moment it would be switched when the other guy was injured (1:22).

The torture of POWs and the use of propaganda is not unique in the wars in which Americans have fought. What may be unique is the degree of torture and the random manner in which it occurred. As a POW, you may be treated in much the same manner by future jailers. In order to overcome and survive such an ordeal, you must learn from the misery of those who passed before us. It is equally important to consider the rules of the game; in this instance, three sets of rules apply to a greater or lesser degree. The first being the prison (camp) rules as defined by the Vietnamese; secondly, the Code of Conduct of the American military fighting man; and last, the PLUMs developed by the American senior-ranking officer (SRO) in North Vietnam to guide POW behavior. We shall examine the specifics of each and attempt to assess their viability.

## Chapter Four

### RULES OF CAPTIVITY, THE CODE OF CONDUCT, AND PLUMS

#### CAMP RULES

There were three sets of rules governing the conduct of POWs. Each had a pervasive effect on the lives of the prisoners and their ability to survive. The camp rules, as set forth by the camp commander, spelled out a number of policies from procedures for sick call to sheltering procedures. In many instances, the camp rules clashed with both the Code of Conduct and the Geneva Convention. In fact, camp rules specifically sought and demanded that POWs collaborate with the enemy.

Lieutenant General John P. Flynn, Brigadier General Robbie Risner, Colonel Bud Day, and Colonel Lee Ellis stated during personal interviews that camp regulations were aimed at achieving total control of each and every prisoner. The Vietnamese tried to control every human act. They dictated when prisoners could talk, sleep, eat, and, at times, when they could use the bathroom. Ultimately, the Vietnamese attempted to control the prisoners' thoughts. Colonel Ellis observed, "... the regulations called for us to do what we were told to do and obey the people in the camp. We couldn't talk out loud and if we did, we'd be severely punished. In other words, we had to do whatever we were told to do and we had to cooperate with them. They wanted to totally control us" (5:--).

The camp rules were designed to exploit the POWs. They specifically required prisoners to answer any question asked of them--a direct violation of the Code of Conduct. Camp regulations demanded total submission to the Vietnamese in all areas. Additionally, propaganda statements, both oral and written, were required upon request. Prisoners who did not comply faced torture and were branded as obstinate and incorrigible. The bulk of the torture that occurred can be linked to the camp rules and POWs' attempt to comply with the provisions of the Code of Conduct. The value of this rule to the Vietnamese was it provided a seemingly legal means of exploitation. If the POWs did not comply with the directives, their jailers felt obligated to force compliance. This regulation attempted to undermine and destroy the morale and value systems of the prisoners. It encouraged prisoners to plot against each other and offered special privileges to those that did. The pitting of prisoner against prisoner was the single most destructive aspect of the system. The Code of Conduct was used as a defense against camp rules by POWs. The Code reinforced American values and gave the POWs a simple set of instructions governing their behavior while in captivity. The Code was a key element that allowed Americans to survive the POW experience. It gave them a sense of purpose, and, more importantly, it served as a vehicle through which they returned home with honor (2:--).

## THE CODE OF CONDUCT

All the former POWs interviewed viewed the Code of Conduct as instrumental in their survival and enabling them to overcome brutality of the prison environment. It helped to unify the POWs and built morale by providing them a moral code to live by. Colonel Bud Day, a prisoner of war for seven years and a constitutional lawyer, had a great deal to say about the Code. His comments are crucial to understanding the POW experience from a historical perspective. During our interview, his knowledge shed a great deal of light on related issues which influenced the development of a Code of Conduct and expectations concerning POW conduct.

Colonel Day explained that questions about a military Code of Conduct resulted from the American experience in Korea. Charles Wilson, then the Under Secretary of Defense, was appointed by President Eisenhower to examine why American POWs in Korea performed so badly. Wilson's committee began by examining the WW II POW experience with specific emphasis on the prisoners held by the Japanese. This group suffered untold brutality in the hands of their captors. Many interviewed survived the Bataan Death March and Pacific theater POW camps. All suffered in Japanese captivity. A second group examined was also interned by the Japanese in the Pacific, but described their treatment as decent. Finally, the committee interviewed Americans held captive by the Germans. This last group received good treatment and had not been tortured. The WW II POWs provided the base from which the Korean experience could be examined. Next, Colonel Day explained that the POWs from Korea, both those who had done well and those who had not, were interviewed. The committee questioned them about their behavior and attempted to design a philosophy concerning prisoner behavior. By all accounts, the Korean experience was barbaric. Four out of every ten POWs were never accounted for. Korean POW camps were marked by both coercion and high degrees of torture. Colonel Day argues that if some kind of quota system is designed to enforce compliance to do this or that, and the individual who refuses realizes he has at least a fifty-fifty chance of being killed, he's under tremendous pressure to comply. "I'm here to tell you," Day said, "that's an awful lot of coercion" (2:--). Out of this experience, the committee wrote a Code of Conduct--a Code of Conduct described by Day as "inspirational." The committee wanted people to see behaviors called for in the Code were possible. Day continued,

All of these things are inspirational because almost all of them are an expression of what a guy ought to do coming out of a POW experience if he has integrity. All of them are such basic things. You almost wonder why they had to be codified. I can say that as a career soldier and as a professional soldier, nobody ever had to write them down, . . . because you knew instinctively as a military man (2:--).

In Day's opinion, the Code was written for a bunch of amateurs. After WW II, the military faced severe cutbacks as the nation embraced peace and attempted to forget the war. Therefore, when the Korean War started there was

only a small cadre of experience in each branch of the service; few draftees had any combat experience. In the rush to stem the advancing North Koreans, the Army rushed troops to Korea. When the Army received quotas to ship soldiers to Korea, "They literally would go to the post-exchange areas, mess halls, commissaries, and grab the first soldiers they saw and ship them out, many not realizing where they were going" (2:--). The situation was compounded, according to Day, by the fact that "... many of these young troops, initially sent to Korea, hardly knew how to fire a weapon or perform maintenance on their weapon. Few, if any, had training in tactics nor were they a homogeneous fighting force. They had not received training as a combat unit" (2:--). As a result of this lack of experience and training, these green troops didn't fare well when they were captured and became POWs (2:--).

Colonel Day believes the difference between the Korean and Vietnam POW experience was that in Vietnam mature, seasoned professionals well versed in the Code of Conduct and comfortable with their own value systems did the fighting. Statements such as: "I'm not going to do or say anything that will hurt the cause of my country, or do or say anything to aid my enemy," were understood by these professionals (2:--).

Colonel Day still feels strongly about the Code and believes it

... has a lot of value because it requires you to think about those things you need to think about as an American fighting man. It requires that you think about situations, should you become a POW and your captors actually put you in a position where they're forcing you to do treasonous things against your country, unloyal things against your fellow man, and, of course, outright criminal things under the military code, you are in peril. By having the Code, the guidelines for your actions are provided (2:1).

The basic tenets established by the Code of Conduct are almost common sense type rules. We have looked at the origins of the Code through the eyes of Colonel Day and understand his impressions of the Code. Colonel Lee Ellis, a POW for over five years, provides this insight.

The Code of Conduct is a very clear statement of our values, of our society, and our military about what we expect from a person who is captured. It says that I'm going to keep faith in my country and its allies, and I'm going to resist cooperating with the enemy. That's in essence what it says. It's a commitment. It says I'm going to do my best to do my part of being a positive asset for my country and not be negative. That was my goal always--to the best of my ability, I wanted to be a positive asset to my country even though I'm a POW. They may have my body, but I'm going to deny them any gain. Now we weren't always able to do that but to the best of our ability, I think we did that pretty well (5:--).

Brigadier General Risner's impression of the Code was parallel to others examined. He offered significant insight on some aspects of the Code that may be impossible to accomplish under certain circumstances.

The Code says, you will attempt to escape at every opportunity. Now there are reasons for that. One is to carry information back to friendly lines, information that they would like to have. Another is to force the enemy to increase the number of guards so that they will be forced to pull troops from front line units. Well, neither of those were realistic objectives as far as we were concerned. One, we did not have tactical or strategic information that they didn't have back home. Two, instead of pulling guards from front line units, all they did was limit our freedom even more. It was already limited to ten or fifteen minutes a day, if you weren't on punishment, for time to wash [sic], and all they did was lock you up tighter and leave you in confinement longer. So, those two were not creditable reasons even though they were good to have in the Code of Conduct. As an on scene commander, you sometimes have to go against a rule or regulation for the benefit of the whole. You are also accountable for your decisions as you are always as a leader. So, in making decisions that there would be no escape without outside help was simply because everytime there was an escape attempt, a lot of other people who were left there suffered a great deal. And nobody was able to escape simply because to walk through a land of people of a different color, a grossly different size and where the inhabitants were profusely different was an impossibility and it caused a great deal of hardship for those left behind. And the existing reasons as spelled out in the fighting man's Code of Conduct did not exist. So, on two different occasions, the senior ranking officer decided there would be no escapes at that time (12:--).

Additionally, according to Colonel Day there is a great misunderstanding about Article V of the Code of Conduct.

The Geneva Convention requires that as a very minimum, if captured, you must give name, rank, service number and date of birth. Previously, this was interpreted to mean that one could not communicate about routine matters of camp administration or health and welfare. Some held a "Rambo" type of attitude that this type communication was in violation of the Code of Conduct. I participated in a review board to look at the code and recommend required changes. We felt it needed changing and you will find in the recent additions of the Code it explains in detail that this type of communication is within the code (2:--).

Colonel Day stated,

A second problem resolved by the board pertained to the chain of command. He said Article IV which states among other things, if I

am senior, I will take command. In Hanoi, we had Air Force, Navy, and Marines; who is in charge? The problem associated with this particular dilemma is also addressed in detail in the revised Code. We were able to work it out (2:--).

The authority for these decisions was the Fourth Allied POW Wing Policies (PLUMS). They were the brainchild of General Flynn. They were a set of camp policies and an expansion of the Code of Conduct shaped by the reality of life in the Hanoi Hilton. The PLUMS covered almost every aspect of POW life. Prisoners were told in very clear language what their expected behavior should be in dealing with their captors. The PLUMS not only spelled out a code of behavior, but identified things that were wrong and things the senior staff were seeking from the Vietnamese to make prison life more humane (11:--).

### THE "PLUMS"

According to General Flynn,

There were many leaders in the Hanoi Hilton and other POW camps. The rule was the senior officer in communication was in charge regardless of service. That was his responsibility and if he did not take charge the next ranking officer would. In the era of improved conditions around 1969, circumstances were such that most of the people from the outlying camps were returned to the Hilton and most were in communication. It was this combination of circumstances that permitted the PLUMS to be established. From the standpoint of policy, our PLUMS, any policy which we put out was discussed very thoroughly before it was put out into the communications network. We had great debates and discussions; we used to call them eight to fives. The point of this is that it was truly a corporate effort, and our PLUMS had implicit meaning. They were the results of lessons learned from the people in command. It was a great lesson in leadership. If you are a leader worth your salt, you must consider the full panorama of possibilities. You must talk to your people and it's a corporate we, and that's why these principles survived to this day. I think they were golden (7:--).

The true importance of the PLUMS was that they were a part of the Code of Conduct and tailored to suit the situation and the reality of POWs in North Vietnam. They also recognized that men could be forced, under torture, to give information to the enemy. The PLUMS simply stated, "If you take hard knocks roll with the punches, you can bounce back to win the next round." Furthermore, "... the objective is to give the enemy nothing. In any case, minimize the enemies net gain by the use of moral courage, physical strength, trickery and cover stories involving only oneself and pre-briefed cohorts" (6:35).

The PLUMS' greater contribution to the POWs was its code of forgiveness. This philosophy was based on the deep religious convictions and high moral principles of General Flynn. He recognized for a variety of reasons every POW may not have complied fully with the requirements contained in the Code of

Conduct. It was of great importance to him that those who may have been weak be given an opportunity to rejoin the group; therefore, the first two parts of the PLUMS reaffirmed those goals. Paragraph A stated, "Any PW who denies or fails to carry out the Code of Conduct, Military Law or Wing Policies may be relieved of all military authority. Emotional instability so serious as to impair judgement for a prolonged period may be cause for relief" (6:33). Paragraph B continued, ". . . only the Wing CO (WCO), Acting WCO, or Senior Ranking Officer (SRO) of detached units has authority to relieve or reinstate. This action must be based upon current performances and not on the past or hearsay. It is neither American nor Christian to nag a repentant sinner to the grave" (6:33). The end objective of the PLUMS was honorable release. Through the leadership of General Flynn and other officers involved in establishing the PLUMS, their goal was achieved.

The PLUMS, by their existence, signaled the establishment of a chain of command. The Vietnamese desperately attempted to discourage any military organization among the POWs. They realized an organized chain of command limited their ability to exploit the POWs for propaganda value. Furthermore, controlling the POWs became more difficult. They attempted to segregate senior officers from the others and subjected this group to both severe torture and solitary confinement. According to General Flynn, during the late 1960s the Vietnamese considered trying selected Americans as war criminals. North Vietnam was bombed by American pilots, but there was no formal declaration of war between the countries. Therefore, American pilots were violating North Vietnamese sovereignty by killing Vietnamese citizens during bombing raids and parachuting into Vietnamese territory after being shot down. The Vietnamese concluded that under this set of circumstances, the Geneva Convention Agreement did not apply to captured Americans. The Vietnamese dreamed about public trials open to the world press. They even planned the judicial outcomes to include sentences. Senior officers faced life imprisonment. Middle grade officers would serve 14 years, while junior officers escaped with a 7-year term. Although the Vietnamese eventually decided against this course of action, they continued to fear the influence of senior-ranking POWs on the overall prison population; therefore, the rigid separation (7:--).

Although the Vietnamese feared the influence of senior officers on the POW population and attempted to eliminate any effective chain of command, it was not until 1971 that an effective communication system was established between the senior officers and the POWs. The Son Tay raid forced the Vietnamese to consolidate all POWs in a single camp. Once communications was established with the senior POWs, a systematic and effective chain of command quickly followed. Soon the Vietnamese were forced to improve prison conditions; torture became almost nonexistent (2:--).

The "PLUMS" cannot be evaluated across the breadth of the POW experience, but, once conditions allowed for enough freedom to establish a chain of command and military organization, they became pivotal in bringing about a reorientation of American POWs with positive emphasis on the Code of Conduct and their later repatriation (12:--).

The POW experience offers even casual observers many valuable lessons and important considerations for future POWs. American values and religion were pivotal influences for POWs. They were core beliefs that enabled Americans to fight and continue living when many felt like giving up.

## Chapter Five

### AMERICAN VALUES AND RELIGION

#### VALUES

American values and religion, "the belief in a superior being," played a major part in the survival of American POWs. To explain these values and their effect on the POWs, POWs' writings and interviews will be examined. American values and beliefs are often intangible. There is with most Americans an awareness of their existence. The truth and concrete proof of their existence normally manifests itself in many of our celebrations, especially Independence Day. This same phenomenon occurs in times of adversity. There is a definite mystique associated with being an American. Perhaps General Daniel James, Jr captured the uniqueness of being an American in his statement explaining American values. James said,

The strength of the United States of America lies in its unity. It lies in free men blessed and ordained with the rights of freedom working to provide, build, enjoy, and grow. Those who would subvert us--or any free people--try to disrupt unity by breaking the small parts from the whole--driving in the wedges of fear and discontent.

I am a Negro and therefore I am subject to their constant harangue. They say: "You James are a member of a minority--you are a black man." They say: "You should be disgusted with this American society--this so called democracy." They say: "You can only progress so far in any field that you choose before somebody puts his foot on your neck for no other reason than you are black."

My heritage of freedom provides my reply. To them I say: "I am a citizen of the United States of America. I am not a second-class citizen and no man here is unless he thinks like one, reasons like one or performs like one. This is my country and I believe in her, and I believe in her flag, and I'll defend her, and I'll fight for her and serve her. If she has any ills, I'll stand by her and hold her hand until in God's given time, through her wisdom and her consideration for the welfare of the entire nation, things are made right again."

Today's world situation requires strong men to stand up and be counted--no matter what their personal grievances are. Our greatest weapon is one we have always possessed--our heritage of freedom, our unity as a nation (10:96).

Using General James' views as a common denominator to establish what American values are, Colonel Ellis had these thoughts.

One of the unique things about American values is the idea of the individual having the right to choose. That is a very fundamental

belief that's so important to us because we have always, virtually since our revolution, been based upon democratic ideals where a person has the right to choose. They can choose to be a democrat, republican or independent, or they can choose to be a brick layer or a businessman. We can choose to go live in another country if we wish, and generally have enough information available to us that we can make a fairly educated choice--one that suits us based on the information as we see it. Now some people, you can give them about the same information and they will make different choices, but that's okay. So, this idea was very important to us as POWs that even though the enemy constantly bombarded us with information, some good and some bad. We had learned as Americans to sift through it ourselves and make our own decisions about the way the world's really put together and decide what's right for us, especially in politics. Whereas in their society, the communist society, you just don't do that. There is only one position. You either buy it or you were willing to take the risk of death or spending some time in jail. I think that fundamental made us feel different. It was obvious we were different. It was obvious to me that what we were doing was right, because what they were doing, I didn't want any part of it. And no free person would ever want to buy into what they have willingly, because it takes away the fundamental human spirit and dignity of the person. In spite of all of our problems, in spite of the fact that we had slaves in this country, the fundamental American today believes very firmly in dignity and the right to choose. Even though there are other free countries in the world, there are none that I think are as strong as this country in the idea of right and wrong (5:--).

Colonel Day agreed with Colonel Ellis about the importance of making choices. He said,

. . .researchers tend to ignore the relationship of men coming from free societies when they investigate elements of captivity as a POW. I think that's one of the more important parts, for it gives you a background and a desire to resist and equally essential is that it gives you the background to make the right choice (2:--).

General Risner's version of Americanism and American values comes from a broader frame of reference. However, it provides another example of the allusive character of this concept. He indicated,

I think nationalism and Americanism is synonymous. You see there is a great deal of pride as an American, pride in America's accomplishments, pride in the fact that most every individual in the world who wants to get out of their own country wants to come to America. Now why is that? It's because America stands for so many of the things that world citizens would like to see afforded all of the world citizens. They know that the only place they can find that in many

circumstances is in the United States. So, where does the vast majority of the refugees come? Legally and illegally is to America [sic]. This speaks great and very strong medicine to me. It says we're the land of milk and honey. We're the land of the free and the home of the great. And I believe in that. We were raised on that. I was taught that in my first years of school. I was taught in Sunday school. I was taught it in the home and I absorbed it through osmosis until I believed wholeheartedly that Americans lived in a very special place, a very special environment and as such, we had every right to be very proud. That pride gave me extra strength. I used to walk up and down my cell and say things to myself to give myself some pride and strength. I used to say things like I'm an American and I would just repeat that. It gave me a lot of extra strength just to repeat to myself that I was an American because of what America means, not only to Americans, but worldwide. There's a saying that I read somewhere and I won't forget it. It says, there are four words that are the best known words in the world today. It said you can write them on the head of the pen; you can paint them across the sky; you can carve them on the Dakota Mountains like the presidents faces; or you can put them to the tune of Yankee Doodle and sing them, but you don't need to do that. They're the best known words in the world and they're imprinted on the hearts and minds of the over 200 million Americans. And those four words are, "I am an American." So, that constitutes a great deal of strength through pride, through loyalty, through dedication. That all constitutes strength, you see. That helped get me through. The two things were my pride in country, my pride and love of country and my faith in God. It's very simple. That's what brought me through (12:--).

We have examined four different definitions of what American values represent. Those four definitions vary in detail and in substance, but all emphasize freedom. General Flynn, the SRO in North Vietnam, sums things up by saying,

. . . being a freeman makes all the difference in the world. You have a heritage of freedom and a belief that freedom is worth fighting for and dying for. It's much more important to have convictions worth dying for than to seek only to survive. Being selfless, having principles, being willing to make the hard choices. Possessing a core value system and being willing to do the right thing (7:--).

From the personal accounts of these former POWs, American values were instrumental in their ability to survive imprisonment in North Vietnam and return with honor. Tied into American values was religion; it was a primary weapon providing both faith and sense of purpose for the POWs.

## RELIGION

In the book, Seven Years in Hanoi, Captain Larry Chesley details his experience as a POW in Vietnam. Specifically, he devoted one full chapter to religion and its impact on his survival in the prison camp environment. His discussion on religion was labeled "No Atheists in Hell Holes"; it perfectly describes the continued faith in God or renewed faith manifested by the POWs in captivity. Chesley states,

During World War II someone coined the phrase, "There are no atheists in foxholes." My observation was that this was true too among the U.S. prisoners of war in the hell hole of Hoa Lo or other prison camps in North Vietnam. It seems that hardship and danger sharpen the religious instincts--or rather, make people feel toward [sic] God (1:82).

In North Vietnam there were many inspirational leaders who had strong Christian faith. One such individual was Captain Ron Storz, who died in captivity. However, his example and sensitivity helped others in their moments of need. His philosophy of "unity over self" expressed the oneness required for the POWs to combat the North Vietnamese. His simple sermon to his fellow prisoners was "Seek God here! This is where you'll find him" (5:63). With this basic approach to both God and his fellow men, he exemplified the kind of faith found throughout the prison camps.

Navy Captain Howard Rutledge spent seven years as a POW. He explains his search to restore his faith.

I never dreamed that I would spend almost seven years (five of them in solitary confinement) in a prison in North Vietnam or that thinking about one memorized verse could have made a whole day bearable. One portion of a verse I did remember was "Thy word have hid in my heart." I put my mind to work. Every day I planned to accomplish certain tasks. I woke early, did my physical exercises, cleaned up as best I could, then began a period of devotional prayer and meditation. I would pray, hum hymns silently, quote scripture, and think about what the verse meant to me (14:36-37).

This period of devotional prayer was typical of most POWs. For some it was a means of passing time and enabled them to withstand the pain of continual torture. Regardless of the need, it offered them sustenance.

General Risner in both his book, Passing of the Night, and when interviewed elaborated on religion in the POW experience.

I think it manifested the survival of nearly every man in the POW camps that faith in God was not only an enhancement to survival, but in some cases, essential and imperative to survival. I think most of the guys you talked to that have served over there will vouch for

that. It has helped me all the way through my career. I was an early believer. I had faith in an Almighty God and I was at peace with him. I was trying to be a respectable citizen in God's eyes (12:--).

General Risner during his years in captivity spent over six years in solitary confinement. He experienced torture and deprivation of food, medical treatment, and blankets to keep warm. At a low ebb both mentally and physically and often feeling a sense of hopelessness and despair, General Risner's faith in God provided the miracles necessary for him to survive. He described several situations where drained of the strength to fight back, he was ready to give up; however, his call for God's help did not go unanswered.

I woke up before the gong went off after spending thirty-two days in stocks. I was hungry, cold and miserable, my room reeked, and I felt weak as a cat. As I had been doing every morning since my imprisonment, I started praying. Until this time I had not prayed for relief from what I was going through; all I had asked for was ability to stand it. But this morning when I started praying, I felt I should do it differently. I said, "Lord, I have been in long enough. I am sick, miserable and cold and hungry. I am asking you to get me out of the stocks, to provide me more clothes, another blanket and some more food" (13:89).

By mid-afternoon, General Risner had been released from his stocks, but only to begin one of the worst torture sessions he was subjected to. He continued to feel, however, that only his faith and God's strength enabled him to survive.

After the failed commando raid at Son Tay, the Vietnamese feared raids on other camps. They brought the POWs from the outlying areas into one central camp--a camp easily defended. Over 350 POWs crowded into the Hanoi Hilton. The POWs' first order of business on the Sabbath was to hold a church service. All recognized that God gave them the strength to survive the worst part of the POW experience. The meaning and purpose of the service is best described by the following quote.

Before imprisonment many of us had been too busy to put God first in our lives. A North Vietnamese prison cell changed that. We learned to feel at ease in talking about God, and we shared our doubts and faith. We prayed for one another and spent time praying together for all kinds of things. Our faith in God was an essential without which I for one could not have made it (13:95).

In summary, during the research for this project, which included previewing several books by former POWs and several personal interviews, it was apparent that religious faith and belief in God was not left behind at Hoa Lo. The POWs, as a group, have maintained a strong belief in God and credit their ability to survive the ordeal to that faith. Some are very vocal about

their faith, while others tend to exhibit a quiet reserve faith. As one fighter pilot told me, "Before Vietnam my life was centered around flying and having fun; now I always reserve time to observe my faith as well" (2:--).

## Chapter Six

### LESSONS LEARNED

There are many valuable lessons to be learned from the Vietnam POW experience. If applied properly, these lessons offer future POWs numerous examples of tangible and intangible things that influence their ability to survive captivity and imprisonment. The areas covered in this chapter range in scope; some are critical in importance while others are merely food for thought. However, each area ultimately played a part in the POWs' struggle to survive.

### RELIGION

American POWs agreed that their ability to survive torture, hunger, cold, and gross inhumane conditions was influenced largely by their religious beliefs. Those with strong religious foundations were better able to cope with captivity. As Captain Larry Chesley pointed out in his book Seven Years in Hanoi, "... there were no atheists in Hell Holes," referring to the prison camps in North Vietnam (1:82). Those who did not possess religious beliefs before captivity quickly developed religious attitudes. POWs of WW II and Korea reported a similar occurrence. American fighting men throughout the ages facing the danger, loneliness, and hardship of combat find a heightened religious awareness. In times of crisis, Americans tend to turn toward God for help and guidance. All interviews conducted during my research reinforced the idea that religious beliefs were crucial to survival (1:82).

### AMERICAN VALUES

Next to religious beliefs, American values were pivotal to overcoming captivity. Vital to understanding American values is a love of democratic principles. Many of the Korean war POWs were deficient in their understanding of the structure and inner operations of their government. This lack of understanding led many to make anti-American statements and freely corroborate with the enemy. When the war ended, a large group of these POWs decided to remain in Korea (2:--).

## CODE OF CONDUCT

All aspects of the Code of Conduct may not apply in all instances and circumstances. The ability of POWs to successfully escape from camps in North Vietnam was almost impossible because of the size, color, and homogeneity of the Vietnamese people. However, the Code offers clear guidance of how a person should conduct himself as a prisoner of war. Understanding what is expected is a vital key to survival and repatriation (2:--).

## FAITH IN COUNTRY AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

It was essential to the mental and physical health of prisoners that they maintain faith in their government and the American people. Knowing and believing the American government was doing everything possible to obtain their release and were supported by the people is critical. This knowledge allowed POWs to persevere against difficult odds and trying conditions (12:--).

The freedom that exists in this country establishes a value system of freedom of choice. In POW camps the ideals associated with freedom and democracy are enhanced. Being a POW in a brutal society such as Vietnam or Korea offered American soldiers a vivid comparison of the virtues found in a democratic society. For many POWs, the experience of the North Vietnam prison camps clearly demonstrated the legitimacy of the war effort to maintain a democratic government in the South. The concept of freedom gives one a noble cause to fight and, if necessary, die. As General Risner stated, the simple phrase "I am an American" strengthened his resolve to survive with honor (12:--).

## SOUND BODY

Many American pilots were injured upon capture. Some were casualties of shrapnel, while others fell prey to faulty ejection systems or beatings upon capture. Those not captured immediately relied on conditioning to avoid capture. Upon capture, medical treatment was often denied to injured American fliers. In North Vietnam, medical doctors and medicines were in short supply; therefore, scarce resources were not used on prisoners. Prisoners with broken legs and arms, severe head injuries, and suffering fractures of all types were forced to march long distances without treatment. Only the body's natural healing processes cured injuries. Torture, insufficient food, and filthy conditions in the camps also demanded strong physical conditioning for survival. Pilots who had been physically active before capture were better equipped to resist torture and the endless ordeals of captivity. Future POWs should learn from this experience--conditioning aids in survival (5:--).

## MAINTAINING ACCOUNTABILITY

Crucial to the release of POWs is accountability. Some system must be established covertly or overtly to account for every American POW. In Vietnam each prisoner memorized the name, rank, service number, service component, and in some cases "shot down date" of every known POW. Colonel Bud Day, for example, recalls being able to recite from memory data on over four hundred airmen. Most of the other POWs developed the same capacity and skill. This knowledge provided American authorities with precise data about many not returning. During the Korean war, four out of ten American soldiers believed to have been POWs were never accounted for. The lack of accounting procedures during the Korea POW experience caused this high rate. It is imperative that the accountability rates achieved by Vietnam POWs be maintained by future POWs (2:--).

## COMMUNICATIONS

Communications between the POWs in Vietnam were essential in many ways. It enabled the POWs to communicate despite prohibition by camp rules. Communications allowed vital information to be passed among POWs and facilitated the accountability process. Communications enabled the "do's and don'ts" of prison life to be passed on to the new prisoners. This aided in the transition process and helped the new POWs avoid unnecessary torture. It was instrumental in establishing a chain of command and became the life line of the POWs. The establishment of an elaborate communications network was made possible through the use of the "tap code." The tap code was created in the summer of 1965; two men worked out a tap code that was simple and could be used to send messages through the walls. They eliminated the letter "K" from the alphabet and used "AC" whenever a "K" was needed; the alphabet now contained 25 letters. By placing each in a box divided into five rows and five columns, the letter "A" transmitted by tap/pause/tap, "H" would be transmitted by two taps/pause/three taps, and so on (19:40). This "code" contributed greatly to the POWs' ability to survive within the North Vietnamese camps.

## MENTAL POWER

In POW camps time passes very slowly; seconds seemed like minutes, minutes like hours. The only constant became continuous boredom. Prisoners spent days, months, years in solitary confinement. Many of the senior officers in Vietnam spent three to four years in solitary and some as long as six years. In this environment, POWs had to be creative, always striving to keep their minds active and alert to maintain their mental stability. Mental stability aided their effective resistance to the Vietnamese. POWs in solitary confinement and those in routine cells used their imaginations to escape the harsh reality of prison life. The imagination provided a mental escape to those confined in Hanoi. Daily trips were taken back home to their families as they imagined the changes that had occurred since their departure. One

POW during his captivity managed to build three houses from the foundation up, including blueprints. Another attempted to recall the name of every student in his sixth grade class. Other POWs recalled parts of the Bible, books, or poems they had read. Recalling past memories and knowledge provided an escape mechanism for POWs and helped to pass the time. Prisoners who were fortunate enough to be able to communicate with others shared their knowledge; those who knew foreign languages such as French, German, or Spanish taught them. Others learned mathematics or science. The subjects taught were only limited by the collective knowledge and interests of the group. At times, some prisoners became so obsessed with their plans or dreams that even after years of solitude they didn't wish to be interrupted out of fear of forgetting something vital. This diversion enabled prisoners to forget their own problems and momentarily their status as POWs. It provided a healthful activity for minds conditioned to flying some of the most sophisticated aircraft in the world. Finally, this thought process cleared their minds of fear and gave them the strength to cope with imprisonment. Future POWs should recognize the importance and the essential necessity to use their mental powers to help pass time in prolonged captivity. An important part of this process is versatility and flexibility of interest; the greater one's interest the better able he is to occupy himself (2:--).

### GAMES

The prison cells in Hoa Lo were sterile and lacking of any real environmental stimuli. There was little in this austere setting to excite the interest of the prisoners; at least the situation seemed that way at first glance. But, look over in the corner of the cell at the rat scavenging for food, observe its movement as it tries to quietly bit off a piece of bread left lying on the floor, and at his attempt to shield it from the others now coming through the small opening. Initially, they all seem to look alike, but at second glance you could see the differences not only in appearance but in mannerism. Watch as an ant discovers a small morsel of bread and attempts to carry it off; magically hundreds appear and systematically carry the small piece off effortlessly. Observe a ray of light shining through a small hole as it reflects a thousand images on the adjacent wall. If you look closely, you can see an image of a cowboy riding his favorite horse. As you continue observing, that small ray of light provides endless images of things familiar to you. Peering outside through that same hole, you observe hundreds of birds in perfect formation flying in total harmony. These examples demonstrate ways in which POWs entertained themselves by becoming more aware of their surroundings and used very insignificant events to keep their minds occupied. Future POWs must utilize their surroundings in the same way to pass time that seems to stand still in captivity (2:--).

## SHARING

Sharing for the POWs was much more than giving someone hungry a piece of bread or a bowl of soup to help them regain their strength after a severe torture session. Sharing involved a total commitment from one prisoner to another. POWs shared the most intimate of feelings, fears, and dreams. The type of openness and honesty existing among POWs created a strong bond between them. There were instances where prisoners communicated with each other for years but had never met. During the years of communicating they had shared many personal details about themselves and their families; therefore, a brotherhood existed in terms of their relationship. Finally, in 1971, the POWs were brought together in one room for the first time. The elation and joy of friends meeting for the first time was an unbelievable, emotional event. They sought one another out and embraced in tears. For the POWs, the only other event having stronger emotional impact was their release and the subsequent homecoming. During the hard years of torture, these men had experienced great physical pain and offered support and comfort to each other. When there was sickness, prisoners served as a combination doctor and nurse. They fed, changed, and cleaned their soiled comrades. When someone could no longer endure the pain of torture and spilled their guts to the Vietnamese, their brothers would welcome them back into the group and give them the moral support necessary for recovery. The kind of sharing that existed among POWs and their ability to help each other during hard and difficult times provided strength. The unity developed among the POWs was a result of the shared experience of captivity. This sharing and concern fostered the will power for many to fight for survival from one day to the next (2:--).

The lessons learned in this chapter contributed to the survival of American POWs. Future POWs can survive captivity through an awareness of what is required to overcome the obstacles imposed upon them by their captors. A sensitivity to the wide range of mental and physical abuse, torture, and deprivation present in prison environments is a major step to achieve victory over its negative effects. Future POWs who learn from these examples will be better able to achieve success and endure.

In conclusion, General Flynn said this about values and his survival:

. . . quite simply, we had a hierarchy of values which we put out to our people, and it was as follows: In everything that I do, I must first do what is best for my God...the free world...my nation...my service...my fellows and finally, myself. That is an impeccable order of values, and once you have them straight, you can take on almost anyone. I call that our gift to you from Hanoi (7:--).

## Chapter Seven

### CONCLUSION

The first American POWs of the Vietnam war were captured in 1964; by 1973, when release came, there were over 450 American prisoners. The treatment was barbaric at best; torture was a constant threat. Vietnamese POW camps were second only to the POW camps of the Korean war and Japan in human suffering and degradation. Despite torture or prolonged solitary confinement, American POWs performed well and followed the Code of Conduct to the very best of their ability.

The POWs were largely ordinary men who possessed no superhuman strength or training. Many had never seriously thought of the possibility of becoming a POW--that happens to the other guy. But once they became prisoners they developed the strength and courage to survive. There were a number of factors which enabled them to survive prolonged captivity and torture. They possessed faith in God and their country, they believed in what they were doing; their actions were guided by the Code of Conduct, and they had individual courage. Additionally, as prisoners, they developed strong leadership, organized resistance and communications. This enabled them to develop a sense of purpose and group solidarity.

Their ability to overcome extreme living conditions and brutality is a lesson of the strength of the human spirit. It is as much a story of America and free men fighting oppression as it is a struggle of survival. The influence of American values and a history of freedom and opportunity is linked to the struggle of the POWs to survive and ultimately release with honor. Their story makes you proud to be an American and is an affirmation of all that is good in this country.

The original purpose of this project was to examine the key factors that enabled American POWs to survive captivity in North Vietnam. The Code of Conduct, American values, religion, the "PLUMS," and communications were identified as key factors. From this data, lessons learned were identified to enable future POWs to cope with and survive as POWs. Finally, it was recommended that service members need to be more aware of the experiences of American POWs to understand the harsh reality of life as a POW.

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